

## ASSIMILATED RANK

OF THE

## CIVIL BRANCH OF THE NAVY.

29851  
Washington D.C.

WITHIN a week, a member of Congress from Ohio made some remarks on the assimilated rank of medical officers and pursers in the Navy, which were reported in the National Intelligencer of the 14th. If that report be correct, the gentleman from Ohio is in error; and if not corrected, the report is calculated to convey wrong notions on the subject to the public. The honourable member has not studied the subject with his usual care, but has probably relied on the erroneous statements of some officers about Washington, who are themselves in error on the subject. A few plain propositions will render it clear, to all persons who do not concur in the sentiment lately uttered by a well-known Captain, at a public dinner, that "principles depend upon circumstances."

An army is a body of men armed to defend the country on land.

A navy is a body of men armed to defend the country on the sea.

An army consists of two classes: officers and privates, the latter being bound to obey the former. The same is true of a navy. The organization and government of both an army and a navy cannot be democratic, but are necessarily aristocratic in their nature.

An army is divided into two branches: a military branch and civil branch, the latter embracing the several departments on which the military branch or "line of the army" depends for its efficiency. These several departments are called staff corps, and include the medical department, pay and subsistence departments, engineers, &c. &c.; therefore, surgeons, pay-masters, commissaries, engineers of all kinds, are termed staff-officers.

In the same manner, a navy is necessarily divided into two branches: a military branch and a civil branch, which includes similar departments to those of an army, but the officers of these departments are not called staff-officers, although they, in fact, discharge staff duties. Like an army, a navy has its medical department, a pay and subsistence departments, in charge of

pursers, its engineer department—including steam-engineers and naval constructors or naval architects—its department of instruction, including chaplains, teachers, &c.

All persons pertaining to a military body, no matter whether of an army or navy, live under martial laws, and are required to conform socially to the conventional customs of a military community, even to the costume in which they may appear. Even personal association is in a degree regulated by the usages and published laws or regulations which always prevail in a military organization. What is simply conventional in civil life, is, in military organizations, reduced to laws or regulations, the infraction of which incurs certain penalties. In civil life, a gentleman might, if so disposed, go to an evening party among ladies in a round jacket, or without a jacket, without subjecting himself to a legal trial before a court, though he might be put in coventry; but a member of a military society could not appear on parade, or on the quarter-deck, without his proper uniform dress, which is made distinctive of position, standing, or respectability, among his military associates, and escape trial by court-martial, under charges of disobedience of orders, insubordination, disrespect to his superior officers, and conduct unbecoming an officer. The conventional laws of civil life, or fashion, determine what, in costume, are the badges which distinguish a gentleman; but in military communities, these badges are determined, on certain principles, and prescribed by regulations or general orders. In all Christian armies, and in the navies of Great Britain and the United States, epaulets of some kind are the prescribed badge of officers holding commissions, without regard to the nature of the duties pertaining to these commissions. To these badges, or labels, respect is paid in a prescribed form, according to the importance of the commission held by the officer. Fashion, or the conventional usages of society, have made coat-tails answer the place of epaulets, among military men, to distinguish persons who are entitled to the forms of respect and consideration which are commonly accorded to gentlemen—that is, to honest, honourable, and intelligent men, refined by education, without regard to their vocation.

The uniform is the badge of *rank*, or the position of the officer as to power or authority, and respectability, relatively to others of the military community. Each individual of a military body has, or should have, a position—that is, a *rank of some kind*, relatively to every other individual of the same body; he must be superior or inferior, in some degree; he cannot be on the same absolute level, under the same circumstances, with any other individual of the body. If he be a captain, although on a level of all of his grade socially, he must be either inferior or superior to other captains, as to his authority or right to command under

particular circumstances, according to the date, or number of his commission. The same is true of other grades. It is for this reason that officers are so jealous of rank—that is, of *lineal* rank, which confers authority or right to command, but not to treat any with disrespect.

All writers on military organization and law, lay it down as a principle, that the relative position, rights, and privileges of every member of a military community should be clearly defined. On this principle, staff-officers are clothed with “assimilated rank,” or rank relatively to lineal rank, or rank in the line. Assimilated rank confers no authority to command, or right to exact obedience, except from those of the same staff-department; a surgeon of our army, for example, has the assimilated rank of a major in the line, and wears epaulets similar in type, but not in detail, to those of a major, but he cannot, in virtue of his assimilated rank, command junior majors, captains, or lieutenants of the line: his assimilated rank, however, gives him the right to exact obedience from junior surgeons, assistant-surgeons, and all subordinate medical attendants placed under his command, by the Executive, or chief authority controlling for the time. His assimilated rank as major simply entitles him, in the military body, to the social position or level of majors of the line; he receives the military salutes and courtesies prescribed for a major; in all military formalities, ceremonies, processions, &c., he takes his place as a major, without cavil or dispute; and in the language of the member from Ohio, “whatever moralists or sentimental people may talk or write, about the weakness of being tickled with so empty a distinction, yet it is well known to every man versed in the feelings of human nature, as it is actually found in every military and naval service under heaven, these honours are dear to the human heart.”

It is not possible for any man to become so familiar with the personal appearance of every officer of an army or a navy as to be able to recognise them. For this reason, it is necessary that certain badges, military hieroglyphics, should be used to mark the officers, and distinguish them from each other and from privates, and that all of a military community should understand their import. Officers of a military branch will perceive the necessity of wearing a uniform dress: it is hoped no one will contend that officers of the civil branch of a military body should not be distinguished or marked in a like manner; or question the authority of the Secretary of the Navy in giving an order to regulate this uniform. Surgeons have always worn navy buttons, cocked-hats, and swords similar to those of other commissioned officers; these military badges do not strike military men as being inconsistent with the vocation of the naval or army surgeon, and their novelty alone, causes epaulets to appear incon-

gruous and offensive. Since they were placed on the shoulders of officers of the civil branch of the navy, some of their military associates petitioned the Secretary to excuse them from wearing this universal badge of the commissioned officer, but having failed to assign any conclusive reasons why the request should be granted, it was refused. If further proof were required on the point, the simple fact, that the laws recognise the right of civil officers of the navy to share prize-money, shows they are regarded as discharging military services, although they may not "point the guns;" and as officers of the civil branch, surgeons, pursers, paymasters, &c., when they die in actual service, are buried with the military ceremonies, called "the honours of war," it is pretty strong evidence that the military officers do not regard them as "mere civilians," but as officers of the military establishment, in every sense of the term. Custom has taught all persons serving in an army or a navy to recognise the position or standing of officers by reading the signs or badges worn on his person. Respect is paid to the coat, not to the man who wears it; in a military community, a man in the garb of a citizen, and not personally known, receives no consideration whatever: even members of Congress, visiting a ship-of-war, would be treated as "mere civilians," unless they were personally recognised by some of the officers.

What is said above of the effects of the assimilated rank of an army surgeon, is true of the assimilated rank assigned to paymasters and other officers of the civil branch of an army.

In the navy of Great Britain the rank, lineal and assimilated, of every individual, from the side-boy to the admiral, is clearly defined, and set forth in the Queen's Regulations. The same is true of the armies of England.

The organization of the navy of the United States has always been defective, because no assimilated rank had been defined or prescribed for any members of its civil branch, until Mr. Bancroft issued the General Order, which seems to offend the member from Ohio. For want of this General Order, or the assignment of an assimilated rank, many difficulties have occurred, and much heart-burning has been suffered, even by chaplains and teachers—to whom a proper assimilated rank and uniform should be assigned. For want of regulation on this subject, several highly esteemed medical officers resigned in the course of two years; as many as eight or nine left the service because they conceived themselves not to be treated with due respect in the naval community.

The member from Ohio stated that the General Order in question, gave rank from that of lieutenant to commander, and placed medical officers and pursers in the line of promotion. The members of the naval committee will have no difficulty in dis-

covering this statement to be erroneous. Assimilated rank can never give promotion in the line.

The member from Ohio questions the authority of the Secretary of the Navy, to give assimilated rank to the officers of the civil branch of the service. Does he also question, in behalf of the military officers of the navy, the right of the Secretary of the Navy or of the President, to give to lieutenants, commanders, and captains of the navy, assimilated rank with captains, majors, colonels, and brigadier-generals of the army? If the authority of the President be good in one case, is it not equally good in the other? Have the military officers of the navy no regard for their assimilated rank with the lineal rank of the army? Let an answer be gathered from the recent events in California.

The member from Ohio complains of *elevating* civil officers—nay, he denies there are any officers but those “who point the guns,” and talks of “*elevating mere civilians*” to a level with officers of the navy! He thus virtually admits that the civil officers employed in the navy are necessarily and unquestionably regarded as the inferiors of the naval aristocracy. Can any degree of assimilated rank really elevate the medical gentlemen of the navy in civil life, or are we to take any degree of lineal rank in the navy as the criterion, standard or level of social elevation by which civilians are to be measured? The member from Ohio indulges in hyperbole when he attempts to make us regard the official position of any grade in the navy or army, as the goal or level to which we should all aspire, in order to be respectable.

The gentleman asks, “Who works the ship?” Certainly not the surgeons or pursers. When epidemics, plague or fever prevails on board, who works the ship then, or who works in the ship? When the enemies’ shot have laid these military men of the sea on the couch of pain, of suffering and of danger, who works in the ship then? The “*mere civilians*” then, may have any rank or pay their present opponents could give?

The opposition to assimilated rank springs exclusively from not clearly understanding its object and purpose; a little calm reflection would concede that the officers of the civil branch do not, cannot seek to command beyond their own sphere, or interfere in any manner with the real interests of the navy, or of its officers. Officers of both branches have or should have a common motive in preserving the harmony, subordination, discipline, and efficiency of the whole service, and where there are differences of opinion as to measures, throw aside personal selfishness, and sacrifice something of *ego* to the common good.

That every individual of a military community should have his position and relations to others clearly defined, cannot be reasonably denied. All officers of the civil branch of the navy without exception, should have an assimilated rank; the lineal rank

of the officers of the military branch establishes their relative position with each other.

The admission or denial of assimilated rank to medical or other officers of the navy, must be decided on the justice of the principles laid down. No military officer, or class of officers, should be so meritorious, in the eyes of the people, as to authorize them to practise injustice towards their fellow-labourers in the civil branch. The habit of "pointing the guns" on deck, or "working ship," in the most skilful manner, requires no extraordinary effort of the human mind; and the personal exposure is not greater in officers of the quarter deck, than in the seamen on the forecastle or at "the side and train tackles;" the profession of military seamen should not be so exaggerated before the people, that legislators may be induced to confer on them exclusive privileges, and encourage unjust or unbecoming behaviour towards "mere civilians."

What, after all, is this "labour of working ship," upon which so much stress is seemingly laid? Gentlemen should not forget there are other ships besides our vessels of war, and that the mates of our packets and merchantmen, keep watch night and day, and work ship most admirably, without being aware that they achieve anything worthy of special admiration. The mate of a merchantman of a thousand tons keeps at least every third watch at sea, and every "day's duty" in port, which is rather more laborious than keeping a four hours' watch in regular turn with five or six, as naval lieutenants are often able to do, in the larger vessels. It sometimes happens too, that lieutenants are enabled to put in practice the axiom, *qui facit per alium, facit per se*, and confide the "working ship" to some one of the passed-midshipmen of the watch, while he lounges under the forecastle. The exercise of the ship's artillery and "pointing the guns" are laborious duties for the time; but the labour, bodily and mental, will contrast unfavourably with the labour which falls to gentlemen engaged in other pursuits. The duties of lieutenants are fatiguing, often laborious, sometimes harassing and hazardous, but they are not so transcendently oppressive as to entitle them to exclusive consideration and distinction. Nevertheless, they should have, in full, all their rights carefully secured, but not to the exclusion of others. These remarks are made with a hearty appreciation of the duties of lieutenants, and are provoked only by a desire to correct the impression probably conveyed to Congress by the gentleman from Ohio, while any intention to detract or injure is honestly disclaimed.

It was stated that the surgeon can leave the ship without asking. No officer of any grade ever leaves a well-disciplined ship to visit the shore without first asking permission; and it is well known that duty is so arranged in port, as to afford lieutenants

an equal opportunity with others to be temporarily absent from duty. But even if they were closely confined by duty, as all officers are sometimes, it does not constitute a reason for denying to medical officers the assimilated rank which has been given.

A false issue and false arguments have been attempted before Congress on this question. It has been contended, virtually, that because A has certain rights, neither B nor C can have any,—that A is an officer *par excellence*, never having been, what B and C should ever remain, a “mere civilian,” and therefore it is presumptuous in B and C to suppose themselves worthy of any consideration. B and C are given high pay by Congress, that they may tolerate in A the exercise of exclusive aristocratic distinctions?

But the nature of the service, or its duration cannot be regarded as arguments against the just rights of any class of men. It does not follow that because A serves as a lieutenant forty years, that B is not entitled to the assimilated rank of commander.

The question of assimilated rank cannot be properly decided on the professional, intellectual, or moral qualifications of officers of either the military or civil branch of the naval service. On this point, a comparison is neither necessary nor useful. Nor is period of service an element of argument, since time alone cannot change or affect the lineal rank or position of any man in service. It would be absurd to ask, How long must a boatswain, lieutenant of marines, purser or surgeon serve, to become a captain in the navy? Nor does it necessarily follow as a consequence, that, because some lieutenants have been twenty years in the navy, man and boy, before reaching the grade of commander, the assimilated rank of commander cannot be given to any one who has not been commissioned twenty years. It will not be seriously urged that an assistant-surgeon or a purser, on being first appointed, ought not to be admitted a member of the ward-room mess, because lieutenants serve ten years as midshipmen before becoming ward-room officers; or on the ground, that medical officers and pursers are “mere civilians.”

The necessity of the staff or civil branches of the naval service to its efficiency, is admitted. No commander willingly goes to sea without surgeon and purser, no matter how small the vessel may be. On the representations of commanders on whom the duties of purser have been recently imposed, in small vessels, the Secretary of the Navy has suggested that Congress create the grade of assistant-pursers; all grades will be pleased to see this suggestion carried into practice, for it is not just to require men to be responsible in a vocation in which they have not been educated. But every man should be duly respected, and protected in his rights and privileges, both socially and officially, in every military community, and not left to depend on the cour-

tesies which his personal, moral, or religious character may or may not win from his associates. Dependence of this kind is always offensive to men of proper pride.

It is believed there is no just reason why medical officers should not have assigned to them the same degree of assimilated rank in the navy as medical officers of our army, relatively to officers of the line of the army. No degree of assimilated rank can, in any manner whatever, interfere with the just power, authority, privileges or position of officers who possess lineal rank; nor can assimilated rank conflict with lineal rank in promotion. Then why do military officers of the navy so warmly oppose the "General Orders" of the Secretary of the Navy? Why should they expose themselves to being suspected of insubordination by appealing to Congress, so long as the Executive is open to hear their reasons, and give them a just appreciation?

The observance of a Christian principle in the examination of this question, would soon reconcile all difficulties and differences: it is therefore recommended to all,—Do unto others as ye would others shall do unto you.

The medical officers and pursers are content with the assimilated rank conferred by the Secretary; but if Congress change it at all, they ask to be placed on a level with corresponding grades of our own army, and to reckon their pay from the date of original entry into the navy, in accordance with the English plan of counting the service of medical officers. The medical officers ask this modification, under an honest conviction that granting their request can in no manner or degree lessen the efficiency of the naval service, or interfere with the just rights of others.

#### CHLOROFORM.

January 17, 1848.